

jim lukaszewski's

# strategy

Originally a periodic supplement  
to Patrick Jackson's **pr reporter**

## BUILDING AND BUSTING TRUST

Often one of the most serious ongoing challenges to building trust and ensuring positive relationships with customers, allies, colleagues, government, and employees is what it takes to establish trust in the first place. It is by far easier to recognize the pattern of those behaviors and attitudes that damage trust, or at least bring credibility into question. Put in a more interesting way, trust is a fragile magical substance like the lignin in trees – it's the glue that holds the fiber of relationships together. Trust is the most fragile and vulnerable agent in a relationship.

First, some important definitions:

- ✘ **Candor:** Truth with an attitude, truth plus the facts, truth plus some perspective, truth that reflects that there may be other observations on the same set of circumstances and facts, but from different points of reference.
- ✘ **Credibility:** Always conferred by others on those whose past behavior, track record, and accomplishments warrant it.
- ✘ **Empathy:** The ongoing, often continuous verbalization of regret, embarrassment, or personal humiliation, promptly conveyed.
- ✘ **Integrity:** The admiration by others shown toward people, products, companies, even ideas and concepts generated by the attributes of credibility, candor, and empathy.
- ✘ **Trust:** Generally the absence of fear, the feeling of reliability and that adverse situations, pain, or mistakes will have less impact or be pre-empted with the aid of the relationship.

It is often assumed that once a bond of trust is established, it is difficult to break. Experience demonstrates that a bond of trust, once established, generally makes reestablishing a relationship easier but the bond itself is fragile. What is truly difficult is trying to develop specific behaviors that can “build” trust. It is easier to identify the behaviors and attitudes that fracture the bond of trust. The most commonly seen trust-busting behaviors are listed and described below:

1. **Arrogance:** Taking action without consulting those directly or indirectly affected. Making decisions unilaterally, without important input from key partners. Action without empathy.
2. **Broken Promises:** One of the crucial bases of trust is that each party can rely on the commitments of the other, both implied and explicit. When those commitments are broken without prior notification, understanding, explanation, and warning, the first element of the relationship to suffer is trust. Losing the safety of commitment can call into question most other elements of the relationship as well.
3. **Chest Beating:** The mindless, needless, and useless flogging of reputational elements, achievements; unwarranted self-congratulatory, self-validating behavior puts distance between those who want to trust and those who need to trust. It's a form of self-deception through self-talking.
4. **Creating Fear:** This usually occurs when something you do damages or threatens to damage someone else without their permission, knowledge, or participation. It could be the appearance of decision; it could be the feeling of unreliability in the relationship.
5. **Deception:** Misleading intentionally through omission, commission, negligence, or incompetence in a relationship creates a feeling of separation and distance. It also creates a sense of disappointment because the individual, product, company, or organization failed to recognize that, at the very least, there should be a sense of candor between the parties no matter what the circumstance.
6. **Denial:** When mistakes are made, errors in judgment occur, a product under performs, or there is a negative surprise, failing to promptly come and forward relate the circumstances candidly with empathy for those who are affected, changes a relationship of trust to one of suspicion and caution.
7. **Disparage the Opposition:** Any time you hear the phrase, "He's uninformed," or "They're just looking to raise money by their actions," or "It's politically motivated," or "They just don't understand," you immediately suspect that the exact opposite is true, and you're likely to be right. All opponents have friends elsewhere. Some of those friends are your friends as well. Victory is never achieved through disparagement. Disparagement causes suspicion, damages relationships, and creates permanent critics.
8. **Disrespect:** Even adversaries can trust each other to some extent, provided there is a sense of respect. When the reputation of an individual, product, or organization is minimized, trivialized, or humiliated, there is a sense of uneasiness and discomfort that often leads to frustration, anger, and outwardly negative behavior.
9. **Failure to Seek Forgiveness:** The pattern for avoiding and repairing mistakes is reasonably well known. However, often even the best public and private approaches are diminished in value when either for reasons of arrogance or stubbornness, a direct, overt approach for seeking forgiveness from the party directly harmed or indirectly affected is not taken. Failure to simply say, "We're sorry," in a timely fashion leads to loss of trust.

**10. Ducking Responsibility:** In the old days, if there was a major incident or accident, a company's first response was to send a crew to paint over its company logo and name, so they would not appear in press photos. Sometimes this phenomenon is called "blame shifting." For example, your product may be perfect in every respect except that it contains a faulty component. Even though the component manufacturer might have taken the responsibility for its problem, it's your problem too because the component resides in your product. Failure to take responsibility diminishes customer, client, and partner trust.

**11. Holding Back:** The essence of trust is having information or confidence in advance of decisions and circumstances so that no matter what happens, those in the relationship are able to count on the behaviors and attitudes of the others. Deliberately withholding information, withholding support, withholding admiration, withholding cooperation and collaboration, but especially withholding information, weakens the relationship.

**12. Ignore the Killer Questions:** Too often when preparing for adverse situations the very serious questions – those that can kill our reputation and, therefore, destroy trust – are either ignored or sanitized so as to be nearly unrecognizable. The honorable, trustworthy organization or individual prepares for the killer questions first and then determines other information that might be useful and helpful to explain or illustrate.

**13. Ignoring Core Values:** Actions that affect core values of individuals and communities can be the most devastating trust busters of all since those things that people value – what they want protected completely – tend to dominate their lives

when adversely affected. The most common core values involve:

- Personal health and safety
- Value of possessions and property
- Environmental threats
- Quality of life values:
  - Freedom from fear
  - Peace of mind
  - Pride in community
  - Absence of conflict
- Economic security
- Community threats

**14. Lies:** Often starting with simple misunderstandings, the truth to one individual or organization can seem untruthful to a competitor or competing interest, simply based on the critic's or competitor's point of reference in relation to a given set of facts and information.

**15. Minimizing Danger:** The moment you hear the phrase, "It's just an isolated incident," instinctively you know it's probably just the reverse. The moment you hear the phrase, "It's old news," you instinctively understand that something new and adverse is about to happen, even if it is based on old circumstances. We trust people who appropriately characterize situations.

**16. Negative Surprise:** Taking action out of character, out of sequence, out of selfish opportunity, or simply without advance notice to those directly or indirectly affected can seriously damage the relationship of trust and will cause a loss of confidence in the relationship.

**17. Stall, Delay:** A great source of frustration is when it's obvious that a situation could be resolved easily and quickly, but isn't. Procrastination and denial go hand-in-

hand. Keep in mind one of the great axioms of military strategy: timidity, hesitation, and indecision are the basic ingredients of defeat.

**18. Underrate Negative Emotion:** The more we adversely affect other's perceptions, lifestyle, or expectations in negative ways, the more likely they are to react emotionally and negatively. The relationship of trust can mitigate potential damage from negative circumstances.

**19. Overrate Your Preparation:** One of the most serious mistakes in a relationship is the assumption that one is prepared to manage most adverse situations and that everyone else will understand what you are doing. Trust in relationships is often broken because when adverse situations occur, few step forward, most back away from the organizations most directly affected. No matter how well the situation is dealt with, trust repair and maintenance must be key parts of any preparation and remediation process.

**20. Victim Confusion:** Irritable reaction to reporters, employees, angry neighbors, and victims' families when they call asking for help, information, explanation, or apology.

Symptoms include time-wasting explanations of how we've been such a good corporate citizen, how we've contributed to the opera, the little league, the shelter program. "We don't deserve to be treated this badly." "Mistakes can happen, even to the best of companies." "We're only human." "Hey! We're victims too."

When these behaviors don't pass the community, media, or victim straight-face test, or are criticized or laughed at, these are definitive signs that trust is being eroded.

The lesson of these examples is that each is an element in a checklist for preventing loss of trust or relationship damage. Avoiding litigation and promptly responding to these negative circumstances are key elements in the rebuilding of trust once it has been damaged or threatened.

This list also serves as a key starting point for analyzing why relationships break down or suffer unexplained lapses.

There is a reason why trust evaporates or diminishes. The explanation probably lies somewhere in the mix of these behaviors. Maintaining a relationship of trust requires constant analysis of the relationship to identify and eliminate negative behaviors, confusion, negative attitudes, and unexpected outcomes.

---

\* For more information on this and other crisis communication management topics, visit the author's website at [www.e911.com](http://www.e911.com).